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Cultural Appropriation, White Purity and 'Woke' Nationalism

While a White Nationalist claims that doing non-white things is tainting the race, the social justice activist claims that doing non-white things is theft. The end result is the same: a pure, untainted, culturally-distinct white race. White Nationalism and Woke Nationalism want the same thing, just for different reasons. Both make the same two mistakes: there is no such thing as a white race, and cultures have never been pure.

By Rhyd Wildermuth (/author/rhyd-wildermuth/) / godsandrads.org

(<https://godsandrads.org/2017/11/24/white-purity-and-woke-nationalism/>)

Mar 27, 2018

1 Save



Three Tales of Red Laces

1.

The old woman hit my leg with her cane. *Hard.*

I was strolling through the Turkish market along the Landwehrkanal in Kreuzberg, Berlin a decade ago. My partner and I were holding hands, getting drunk on the smells

and sounds of the market. It was summer, everything felt luscious, the mundane world I'd known so far from that moment that the rap on my leg felt almost unreal.

“Ich hoffe das ist nicht nur *Quatsch*.”

I stopped, looked at her. She was old but energetic, flexible enough to bend down and grab my ankle with a strong grip. My German was almost good enough to understand what she'd said, but that didn't make what she was doing seem any more sensible.

I turned to my boyfriend, panicked and helpless. “What's going on and why is she grabbing me?”

He looked at me, looked at her, and then shrugged. “She wants to make sure your boot laces aren't just nonsense.”

I looked at her again, sheepishly. “Nein...” I sputtered. Ich bin...*Links*.”

The old woman hit my leg with her cane again, releasing my ankle. “Gut,” she barked, smiled, and then told me to tie my boots better.

2.

A few years later, I was back in Berlin again, this time with a different partner. It was Friday night, and we were getting ready to go to a club called Laboratory. For the uninitiated, Laboratory (formerly “Laboratory Faustus”) is a massive club located in the basement of a former coal power plant. The rest of the building houses Berlin's most famous techno club, Berghain, but...we weren't going to dance.

Watching me get ready, with a wry smile our host asked me if I needed a different pair of boot laces.

Naive me, so new and innocent in the world (I was 30), shrugged. “Why? Red's not okay?”

He and my boyfriend both laughed at me. “I did not know you like fisting, but okay.”

“Wait—” I sputtered. “Red laces mean you're a leftist.”

“Ja, on the street. But not in a sex club,” my German friend answered. “But all I have are yellow, so tonight you will be a piss pig.”

3.

Last week in the bourgeois hipster enclave of Portland, Oregon, in the United States, “activists” recently became outraged at a Dr. Martens advertisement

(http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2017/11/dr_martens_portland_billboard.html) bearing hidden “racist” meanings. The advertisement in question features a pair of black boots with red&yellow plaid laces. According to “local anti-hate group activists,” the image of the boots are racist because, as the Southern Poverty Law Center informs us, (<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/racist-skinhead-glossary>) red laces signify that the person is a fascist who has ‘shed blood’ for whiteness.

It is probably quite fair to say that those activists (or the very small minority of fascists who might wear red laces) don’t have any gay male friends, and have never met a European leftist.

Symbol & Sign

The fact that a basic symbol such as red boot laces can mean multiple things seems rather obvious. In fact, the very nature of a symbol allows it to contain multiple meanings, and those meanings can sometimes operate differently to people simultaneously experiencing the same symbol. A swastika on the foot of the Buddha or in Hopi art likely won’t mean the same thing to a holocaust survivor, for instance.

This isn’t just true of symbols, but also of words. In fact, playing with the tendency of humans to forget that a word can have multiple meanings is the core mechanism of most humor, especially in puns and other forms of word play. So, too, in literature, especially in poetry. In poetry, the various shades of meaning (connotations) of a word are what allows the poet to say much in very little, while the ‘double entendre’ in literature and drama plays specifically off the varying meanings of words, as seen in this line from T. H White’s *The Once And Future King*:

Gawaine and Gareth took turns with the fat ass, one of them whacking it while the other rode bareback

Most of us tend to grip towards one meaning of a symbol to the exclusion of all others, especially if we have little or no experience with other contexts for it. So unless you’re gay or familiar with gay sex jargon, you might not know that ‘bareback’ means sex

without a condom. If you have not read much older literature you might have forgotten that 'ass' was a common word for donkey.

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Sometimes we have trouble accepting the multiple meanings of a word or symbol. And sometimes, some of us insist that the word or symbol only has one meaning. This insistence, that a symbol only has one "true" meaning, is one of the core mechanisms of Christian Fundamentalism in the United States. It started with the command that the words of the Bible must be taken literally, rather than opened to dangerous 'liberal' interpretation. So when the authors of Genesis (God Himself, supposedly) stated that the world was created in six days, that's *literally* what happened.

So it's then quite amusing that 'literally' does not just mean 'literal,' but it also now means 'figurative.' I had the opportunity to witness an angry exchange by actual (literal!) fascists about a dictionary's inclusion of that opposite definition (those are called 'contranymy,' by the way). "*Cultural Marxists are ruining English,*" one said. "*They want to make women and men into their opposites and do the same for words.*"

I interjected with a handful of older contranymy they'd probably forgotten:

I hope we can all literally weather the attempts of cultural marxists to literally weather away the meaning of our words. They're literally cleaving the meaning from the words, when we know they should literally cleave together. They're using these tactics as a literal screen for their attempts to literally screen out any of us who know that words only have one meaning.

Unfortunately, this sort of fundamentalist thinking about words and symbols is not limited to Christians or the far right. In fact, it has become one of the core doctrines in a lot of liberal 'social justice' thought, and not just when it comes to red boot laces.

Cultural Property

To see this, let's look at the term "cultural appropriation." In its most common social justice usage, it's come to mean theft (usually by white people) of indigenous, Black, or foreign spiritual or cultural forms. Having dreadlocks, native headdresses (like war bonnets), or calling yourself a shaman while also being white are all examples of its popular meaning, and in some cases eating 'non-white' food or becoming part of a

'non-white' religious tradition are also considered cultural appropriation.



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The term cultural appropriation didn't originally mean this, however, and only began to mean what it does now because of the explosion (<https://godsandrads.org/2017/11/10/reacting-to-reactions-to-reactions-a-review-of-angela-nagles-kill-all-normies/>) of internet social justice culture.

To uncover the original meaning, we need only to look at the word 'appropriation.' To appropriate something is literally to turn it into property somehow, and also to prevent others from using it. So, for example, when a government or a corporation takes common land or resources away from the public and makes it their own, they've appropriated it. Or when a museum takes indigenous cultural artifacts away from the people (including skeletons) and puts them in a museum, they've appropriated those cultural items.

Interestingly, when the term cultural appropriation was first used, it referred to something completely different: the way that poor and oppressed peoples took from the dominant culture in order to create vibrant subcultures. As Shuja Haider (<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/01/safety-pin-box-richard-spencer-neo-nazis-alt-right-identity-politics/>) explains:

It may come as some surprise on both sides of the battlefield, but the Left has not always understood “cultural appropriation” as a form of oppression. This connotation of the term has become ubiquitous in today’s social media-driven political climate. But when it first came into use, “cultural appropriation” denoted very nearly the opposite of its contemporary meaning.

The idea preceded the term, as a product of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. For thinkers like Stuart Hall, cultural appropriation described the way subcultures were created... But the precedents ran deeper. Indian food in England, Negro spirituals in America, bathhouses in 19th-century France — these were all contexts in which members of what we might now call “marginalized groups” used elements of a dominant culture in altered forms, generating their own communities that could hide in plain sight.

Without understanding or even acknowledging the other meanings of cultural appropriation (and specifically the word *appropriation*), all the arguments about what is 'appropriative' become fundamentalist. Basically, a white person doing, saying, wearing, eating, or believing anything that could be said to have belonged to peoples and cultures who are not white is cultural appropriation.

This might be the dominant way of understanding cultural appropriation, but it isn't the only way. The term itself contains the key to a larger concept, that of turning things into property. When a corporation sells native headdresses, dream catchers, or African-indigenous art, they have turned cultural and spiritual forms into products for profit. This is the very same thing the capitalists do to land and natural resources like water or trees. When a person tries to sell people spiritual teachings or services that aren't actually sold by the cultures that came up with them, they've turned something available for free into something you must pay for.

Similarly, most people who use the term 'cultural appropriation' are likewise unfamiliar with the meaning of the word 'appropriation' outside of American social justice jargon. It's a great shame, because just like the social justice activists who saw the Dr. Marten advertisement and screamed 'racist,' without knowing that appropriation has a much larger meaning they fall into fundamentalist thinking. They miss out on a crucial understanding of what the entire term meant when it was first employed, as well as lacking the knowledge to understand precisely what is happening in cultural appropriation.

When a cultural or spiritual form is appropriated, *it is literally turned into property*. A company that sells native head-dresses has turned a cultural tradition into a product that can be bought and sold. The war bonnet in its original cultural context was not something that was bought and sold—it was made for specific purposes, gifted by the community to someone. Appropriating it, then, is turning something that was never a product into a product to be sold for a capitalists's benefit.

So when the term cultural appropriation is used to refer to people who are not of African descent who have dreadlocks, or people who are not of Indian descent who revere Hindu deities, the original meaning of cultural appropriation is completely lost. There is no property involved in those examples: no one actually owns gods or

hair styles, at least until the capitalists find a way to steal them and sell them back to us.



White Purity & Woke Nationalism

So why do social justice activists insist that white people shouldn't adopt the cultural and spiritual forms of people who are not white?

In some cases, there is a more complicated injustice at play. Take the example of dreadlocks. In the United States, Blacks were (and often still are) severely oppressed for wearing them. So whites to wear them in a culture that calls Blacks who wear them 'dirty' is absolutely obnoxious, and can seem cruel (even if whites who wear them have never discriminated against Blacks with dreads).

This same obnoxious turn occurs elsewhere. For instance, in many cities and towns within the United States, laws were passed in the last century forbidding gardens and urban farming. These laws specifically targeted immigrants who raised their own food in their yards, and made it very difficult for them to survive. In many of those exact same places, it has been white middle-class people (particularly women) who have gotten those laws overturned so that they can have urban chicken coops and gardens of their own.

Some have called that second example cultural appropriation. Similar to this, some social justice activists have stated that white people shouldn't eat collard greens because they are traditional African-American food (though they were actually introduced to them by the British (<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/01/whats-leafy-and-green-and-eaten-by-blacks-and-whites/424554/>), who got them from the Greeks). And here's where we can start to understand what is really wrong with the social justice view of culture appropriation: *it's white separatism*.

In a podcast (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXOduLFvRg4>) with Alkistic Dimech and Peter Grey, Gordon White used the term "Woke Nationalism" to describe this particular kind of purity politics. "*It's the 'nothing on the plate can touch' idea*" he said, adding that it was not much different from white nationalism.

He's right. White Nationalists build their fascist ideology around notions of purity and

segregation. Whites and Blacks should never mix, never love each other (and definitely never have children together). Whites must be kept separated from other bloodlines and other cultures, must keep their culture distinct and pure. Whites must not do non-white things, adopt non-white customs or modes of dress or beliefs.

This is unfortunately the same logic of the social justice fundamentalist view of cultural appropriation. But while a White Nationalist claims that doing non-white things is tainting the race, the social justice activist claims that doing non-white things is theft. The end result is the same: a pure, untainted, culturally-distinct white race. White Nationalism and Woke Nationalism want the same thing, just for different reasons.

When they look to cultural forms and ethnic groups with a fundamentalist perspective, social justice activists repeat the same racism of white nationalists. Whites must only do 'white' things, whether that is the fascist desire to purify the white race or the liberal command to avoid 'cultural appropriation.' Social justice obsession with white purity becomes indeed a sort of 'woke' nationalism, a white-knuckled grasp on the dying construct of Whiteness, insisting that symbols and people and cultures are closed, divinely-created systems, and that races and cultures should never be allowed mix.

Both make the same two mistakes: there is no such thing as a white race, and cultures have never been pure.

Ending the White Race

Whiteness isn't actually a tribal or cultural form (no one was "white" 500 years ago) and thus there is no such thing as 'white ancestry.' Caucasian isn't a tribal or cultural term either—it was invented (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caucasian_race) by a race theorist at the end of the 18th century.

Whiteness is a very recent idea, and comes from the complete erasure of ancestral and cultural histories. To be 'white' is to no longer have a cultural history; in order to become fully white, European immigrants (especially from places still not fully considered white in Europe, like Ireland, Poland, Italy, Greece, and Spain) needed to forsake their specific cultural and ethnic backgrounds. By doing so, they gained access to white skin-privilege in the United States and Canada and became assimilated into

‘whiteness.’ All their history, their beliefs, traditions, modes of dress and food and their languages were bleached out of them, but in return they gained a new settler-colonial identity which granted them a little more access to wealth and security.

We need to go a little farther here, though, because there is actually no such thing as ‘ancestrally-French’ or ‘ancestrally-German.’ Neither of those places actually existed three hundred years ago. Instead, one might have been ancestrally-Breton or ancestrally-Bavarian. Go back a little further and those ancestral connections existed on the level of village or countryside, not ethnic people-groups.

Even more fascinating, however, is that there were no pure or pristine cultures back then, either.

People moved, and moved a lot. They traded, they inter-married, their cultural and religious forms becoming mixed in precisely the way that terrifies both social justice activists and white nationalists. Vikings “culturally appropriated” by making clothing with Islamic verse on them (<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/oct/13/viking-burial-clothes-woven-with-allah-unveiled-by-swedish-university>). Celts “culturally appropriated” Egyptian and Greek deities in what is now London (<https://www.heritagedaily.com/2013/11/lost-temple-of-isis-in-london/100279>), 2000 years ago. Sephardic Jews and Moorish Muslims and Iberian pagans mixed their cultures and languages fluidly in Al Andalus. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Andalus>) Semitic Phoenicians traded as far up to Cornwall (<https://goo.gl/images/LnX63x>), littering the Atlantic coasts of Europe with their artifacts.

Cultural exchange is not only an ancient thing, but it is unavoidable. When peoples come into contact with each other, they trade, they talk, they borrow, they teach and mimic each other. Likewise, racial purity is impossible—people have an odd tendency to want to sleep with each other, regardless of where they’re from.

That both social justice activists and white nationalists have trouble understanding this comes from the very same mechanism by which social justice activists saw red boot laces on an advertisement and screamed ‘racism.’ Both are certain that ‘whiteness’ means something, and both insist that whites cannot be anything else but what they’ve decided they are.

To get out of this mess isn’t easy, but it’s possible.

First, we must release our fundamentalist death grip on symbols and meaning, and especially our white-knuckled grasp on 'whiteness.' To do so, we'll need to look at our past with a different perspective, rejecting the fundamentalist narratives of both white nationalism and 'woke' nationalism.

Because though whites have lost their ancestral connection, European spiritual and cultural forms didn't just disappear because Americans forgot them. Here where I now live in Bretagne, spiritual and magical traditions still exist—there's no need for anyone here to hire a plastic shaman or join an online witch course to learn about Ankou, the Korrigan, or any of the other spirits and gods of their land—*they can just ask their grandparents*. The same is true in many parts of Europe, especially in non-urban areas.

Reconnecting to cultural and ancestral traditions will require giving up something, though. Because whiteness is not just built upon the erasure of ethnic and cultural history, but also upon the lie that whites are enlightened, progressive, and 'modern' while all the rest of the world (now and in the past) was primitive, unenlightened, superstitious, and stupid.

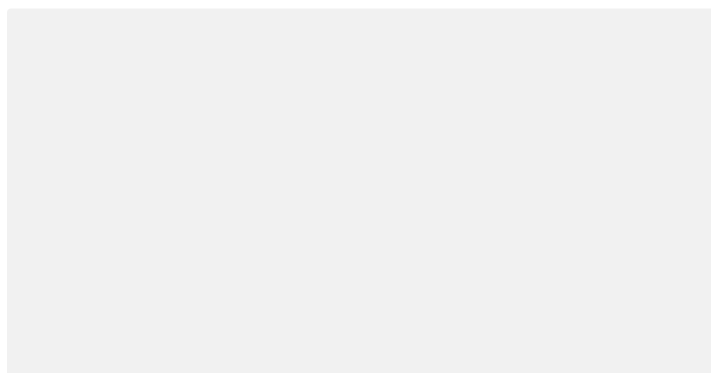
Here, again, liberal social justice ideas actually get in the way of dismantling whiteness by painting the current regime of rights and technology as more enlightened than anything that existed before. Whiteness itself is founded upon this idea, the certainty that we know the true meaning of things. That the order of the world that came about with whiteness is the best one, that all other ways of being are wrong. In this way, even people who are not white but who hold on to this lie are making sure whiteness never ends.

And finally, we must talk about cultural appropriation in a way that actually fights those who are turning what belongs to everyone into property. The pharmaceutical companies and petty capitalists that patent ancient medicines, the universities that steal indigenous artifacts for 'research,' the media conglomerates who sell us fictive versions of our own history, all the plastic shamans and spiritual teachers who sell us knowledge that was once free, and anyone who would try to police our cultural, spiritual, and social expressions, be they white nationalists or 'woke' nationalists—they are the ones stealing meaning from the world.

» FILMS FOR ACTION Rhydd Wildermuth is a co-founder and the managing editor of Gods&Radicals (<https://godsandraddicals.org>). He's a poet, writer, theorist, and nomad currently living in occupied Bretagne. Find his primary blog here (<https://paganarch.com/blog/>), his Facebook here (<https://www.facebook.com/rhydd.arch.7>), or support him on Patreon here (<https://www.patreon.com/Paganarch>).

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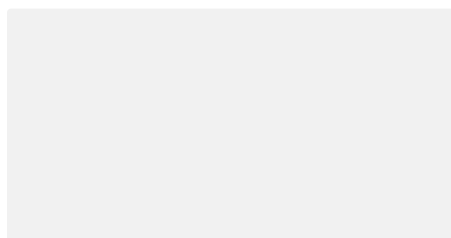
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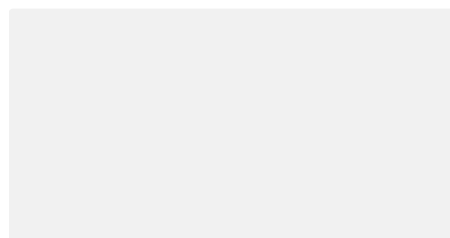
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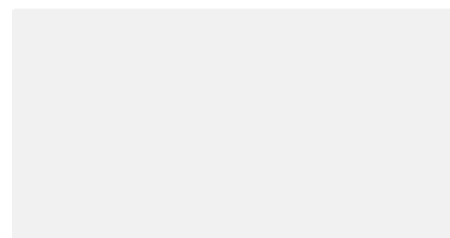
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